

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Frederick G. “Bud” Wright, Executive Director, American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO)**

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

### **Driving Home the Message: Making Transportation Policy Personal**

I don't think that we have done as good a job as we can of telling the story to American citizens of why transportation investment is important, and I think convincing people that some of what they face in our transportation systems are not givens, that the conditions and costs we face today can be improved. We know, for example, that we can substantially reduce transportation fatalities, in particular highway fatalities. We know that we have the tools to substantially reduce congestion and improve highway performance, and some of that is with investment in other modes of transportation. We know how to provide mobility choices and integrate and interconnect transportation modes and provide the users of the transportation system with different ways to get to and from work. So I think part of the challenge is that we need to personalize the story. The notion of throwing these trillion-dollar numbers out there and expecting anyone to be able to get their arms around what that means is a challenge. But if you can make the story a more personal one, where you can say that willingness to invest in our national transportation program means that the commute that you face every day is going to be reduced by 15 minutes, or the number of people that are going to die on America's highways can be reduced by X number. I think then people begin to say, "Okay, well, that's something that I want to be a part of; that's something that I am willing to invest in." I think the other part of this is that we haven't done a very good job of conveying to the American public—and our elected officials, I would add—just what a relative bargain transportation investment represents compared to some other things that people consider to be utilities or regular expenses that they incur: things like comparing the cost of transportation to what people pay for their monthly cell-phone use, or internet connections, or cable TV. I think people begin to understand, "Well, wait a minute. I thought that when I paid \$3.50 a gallon for gasoline that a big chunk of that was going to taxes to support investment," and of course we know that the reality is that it's a relatively small portion of that that actually supports transportation investment in this country. I think that it's not something that can be successful overnight, but I think it's telling that story in a better way, in one that localizes it and brings it down to the level where the individual user can appreciate what we're talking about.

### **Grassroots Action for Transportation**

We know that congestion continues to increase on roadways in the country; we know that we have an aging infrastructure that, while we are making some incremental progress, we know that there are some significant challenges ahead of us as it relates to the age of bridges and the condition of some of our pavements. That, combined with

the fact that we know we're going to have significant population growth in this country over the next 25-30 years, we know that the amount of freight moved in our transportation system is going to double by the year 2040, points to the fact that, yes, while we're maybe barely keeping up we certainly are not, in any way, getting ahead of the game. I'm convinced that it's going to take grassroots involvement to convince elected officials that it's time to get serious about the additional investment. This is not an expenditure program; this is an investment program. Again, I think it is bringing that message home, that transportation really does affect our competitiveness and that means it affects out-of-pocket costs to everyday things. It affects the ability to create additional jobs in our economy; it affects the quality of life that people want to have. Too many of us are willing to throw in the towel and say, "Oh well, I guess this is the way it's always going to be," without recognizing that we have the opportunity to dramatically improve people's lives on an everyday basis. This is something that we've known is the challenge for some time, and we have not been very successful in changing the dialogue, but something we're trying to do, we try as best we can to quantify economic benefits, to talk about the specific elements of how public transportation improvement is going to affect a community or affect the people in that community. Just driving the message in that direction so that it becomes real and tangible to people, rather than a massive government program, is how we're ultimately going to succeed.

### **State DOTs: Learning to Make the Most of What We Have**

I think the most important thing for us right now is to preserve the investment that we have already made, and that is to say that we know that many of our bridges and much of the pavement and other structures associated with highways that have been in place for a while is rapidly getting to the point where they're going to need a major overhaul. We also know that the longer you put it off, the more expensive, typically, it's going to be to carry out those kinds of activities. So that, I will admit, is a hard message to say to the public: here's why this repaving of a 20-mile section of Interstate-95 is a significant project. But it really is, I think, the foundation of what we have a responsibility to do. It's just like we talk about our own homes. You build a home and you don't just walk away from it for the next hundred years. You're going to have to make investments to not only maintain it, but to upgrade it. I think that's part of what we have a responsibility to do and I think that's probably at the head of the list of the responsibilities for transportation investment, and that applies not just to highways, that applies to public transportation systems in this country, as well as passenger rail systems in this country, so it's certainly not just limited to highways, it's not just limited to transportation. It's all of infrastructure that is in that condition. The additional point that I would add to that, from a state department of transportation standpoint, is that we're not going to build many new highways in a new location in this country going forward, so we've got to find ways to get maximum operating efficiency out of the roadways that currently exist. And there are, again, lots of ways, lots of tools available to do that, but it is an endeavor that is somewhat new to many of the state DOTs. They have, in the past, been predominately construction agencies, and they are in the process of transitioning to being operating agencies, that is finding ways to get the most effectiveness out of the already existing

facilities. I think those are going to be the kinds of things that AASHTO is going to be pushing: achieving better performance and ensuring that we preserve the investment that we've already made.

### **Our Highway System Isn't Only Used by Drivers**

Living in the Washington, DC area you do have many choices, whether it's biking or using Metro or many other ways to move around, but I have occasionally heard people say, "Well I don't use the roads, I don't use the highway system because I bike to work or I use Metro," and my response to many people is, "Well, what about that Amazon package that you ordered yesterday and it was sitting on your doorstep the next morning. How do you think it got there?" People don't think about the complexities of what that takes. It's a transportation network that is not only expansive enough to handle those kinds of demands, but reliable enough so that somebody like Amazon or UPS or FedEx can, in fact, guarantee that they're going to be able to deliver a commodity overnight.

### **Social Media Increases Engagement**

Social media is, I think, a key to reaching the younger generation, and what many of the state DOTs find is that there is a lot of interest in people wanting up-to-date traffic conditions information or weather information or something relating to a project that affects their daily lives, so they're using social media to push those daily reports of traffic information out to people within their states and within their communities. Once someone is engaged in a Twitter relationship with the state DOT, some of the state DOTs are now using that platform to pitch other messages about the importance of investment, really getting into the story, as opposed to the particular information that someone might have initially sought from the state DOTs. We talk about that a lot with our state DOTs, because I think it is another avenue by which we can engage with regular citizenry, and I think we're engaging youth. We're using a platform that they're much more comfortable with. None of them are probably, on a daily basis, going to hold a Washington Post paper copy in their hand in the way that I've done for my entire life. I think we have to be smart about engaging with people through the means that they generally use, and we're trying to do that, and I think the state DOTs are trying to do that as well.

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